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## Religion and the rise of populism

The seemingly unstoppable rise of populism has caught observers by surprise. Donald Trump's US election victory, the Brexit referendum in Britain, and President Erdoğan's emboldened power in Turkey are just three of the many cases in which populism has radically altered the tenor of contemporary politics. In these three examples religion seems to have played a significant role, yet is often overlooked.

In this special issue we aim to provide a corrective to the general neglect of religion in academic work on populism. The contributors to this special issue shed light on roles of religion in the three populist cases already mentioned as well as in an array of other examples of populist discourse and action, stretching from Germany to Kyrgyzstan. In this brief introductory piece we draw on key existing works and the case studies included in this issue to suggest useful ways of approaching the intersections of religion and populism.

### The roles of religion in populism

Amidst the dearth of work on religion and populism, two prominent social scientists, Olivier Roy and Rogers Brubaker, have recently written on these themes. In *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (2016), Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Oliver Roy offer a balanced look at the intersection of populist movements and democratic politics in country case studies which include the US and Israel, alongside eight European nations. Published too early in 2016 to take into account Donald Trump's election victory or the results of the Brexit referendum, the book includes a chapter by Olivier Roy on the *Front National* (FN) in France (2016a) and his conclusion to volume (2016b), both of which are particularly insightful and relevant to the theme of this special issue.

Roy (2016a) demonstrates how the FN instrumentalises Christianity in its politics, yet often finds itself at odds with the institutional Catholic Church. An amalgam of secularist, Christian, and pagan currents, the FN tends to see the Church as too liberal on issues of immigration, and yet, interestingly, too conservative on family values and sexuality. The FN can therefore dismiss the Church as an element of the loathed French establishment. In doing this, it simultaneously taps in its own 'Christian' identitarian narrative while upholding the strong anti-clericalism that undergirds French *laïcité*. In his conclusion, drawing on this and other cases from the volume, Roy remarks that for populist parties, 'religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling them to distinguish between the good "us" and the bad "them"' (2016b: 186). Christianity as national identity is so 'thin' that, as Roy puts it, it can be easily 'hijacked'. Christian identity has the dual purposes of building nostalgia for a golden national past and rendering Islam an intrinsically foreign culture. In Roy's words, populist movements that employ Christianity are 'Christian largely to the extent that they reject Islam' (2016b: 186).

The sociologist Roger Brubaker has more recently entered the fray on populism and religion, with an essay that provides a conceptual exploration of populism (2017a) and another

that centrally concerns Christianity as a key factor in the civilisational politics of populism (2017b). Brubaker (2017a) takes a 'stylistic repertoire' approach to populism, building from Benjamin Moffitt's (2016) work on populism as political style, among others. In reference to religion, Brubaker (2017b) argues that populist movements in North Atlantic societies share a kind of 'civilizationism' in which they cast Islam as a threat to their civilisational integrity. These movements tend to respond to this threat with what Brubaker calls 'Christianism' which, ironically, includes putatively liberal views on issues of gender and sexuality as a way of distinguishing a 'Christian civilisation' from allegedly regressive Islamic cultures. A strong illustration of this is the Dutch case, where the murders of two staunch critics of Islam – politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo Van Gogh – set in motion a movement of Christian civilisational rhetoric against Islam in this relatively secular country. The anti-Muslim 'civilisational fight' in the Netherlands is now spearheaded by Geert Wilders. Brubaker argues that the same dynamics of Christian civilizationism are mirrored in many cases throughout Europe and in the US.

Putting together the insights of Roy and Brubaker, then, we can see that the role of religion in populism seems to be almost entirely identitarian and negative: it is about what distinguishes the 'civilised' western societies from 'barbaric' Muslims. In the contexts these authors have studied, populist politicians evoke a reinvented Christian past to warn about the existential threat of its loss in the face of the invading Muslims robbing it from the present. 'The people' therefore must *expel* these Muslims from the nation's future to guarantee its survival. It is clear, as Brubaker writes, that populist politicians borrow liberally from each other in their repertoires of (anti-)religious expression. This tallies well with Roy's observation that populists who make use of Christianity tend to be Christian essentially only to the degree that they are anti-Muslim.

These aspects of Roy and Brubaker's thinking bring out two important elements of populism: its vertical and horizontal dimensions (Brubaker 2017a). Populism is an anti-elite politics 'in the name of the sovereign People' (Aslanidis 2016), as it is the liberal establishment that is responsible for the erosion of the nation's virtues and its wellbeing. Populists are also against 'others' (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016: 2) who threaten these national virtues and wellbeing. In western states, the opposition to 'others' tends to focus on immigrants and/or Muslims. In the non-western or anti-western variants of populism, 'others' can be 'secularists', 'communists', or 'western intruders' themselves. Populists single out 'others' as a threat to the livelihoods or the cultural heritage of 'the people'. It is often the case that populists object to elites precisely because they have been seen as catering to 'others' for far too long. They are therefore guilty of misusing power that should rightfully be in the hands of 'the people'.

## **The populist style and populist politics**

Populism has become a buzzword to refer to a disparate range of phenomena that appear to have much in common but can involve radically different ideas, sentiments and politics, both right-wing (e.g. FN in France and Lega Nord in Italy) and left-wing (e.g. Mélenchon in France and Chávez in Venezuela). Some of the latest contributions to the vast literature on populism (for a useful overview, see Brubaker 2017a), seem to offer useful conceptual solutions to this puzzle

of the diverse manifestations of what appears to be a recognisable phenomenon. The new approaches point out that populism can hardly be seen as a ‘thin-centered’ ideology that sets a noble people against corrupt elites, as Cas Mudde (2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012) suggested in his influential work. This ideological approach fails to capture the malleability of actual populism (Aslanidis 2016; Moffitt and Tormey 2014), and the virtual absence of consistent ideology in many of its salient manifestations (e.g. Trump, Le Pen, Chaves, etc). Most convincingly, Moffitt (2016) treats populism as a ‘political style’, or a repertoire of discourse, political image, and performance (see also Brubaker 2017a, and Bonikowski and Gidron 2015). In doing so he recognises that populism is not only discursive, but it also involves performative elements such as gestures, emotional tone, imagery, and symbolism.

The political style approach is more fitting to populism in practice because as researchers we are not in a position to strictly categorise who is or is not a populist. Political styles are transposable and can be used for a set period of time within specific contexts, such as in an election campaign or a time of crisis. In very different contexts, Russian President Vladimir Putin and former Australian Prime Minister John Howard have engaged in a populist manner, but for various reasons might not ‘pass’ a populist ideology test. Indeed sometimes a populist style can be adopted by leaderless movements. The arguably populist and successful Swiss campaign to ban minarets was run by a loose grouping of individuals, many associated with the Swiss People’s Party. Rather than relying on the charisma of a leader, the campaign became notorious for its anti-minaret posters of a woman in a burqa surrounded by ominous missile-like black minarets, thus drawing from the repertoire of populist style to appeal to the voters.

If populism is a political style, then what are its key stylistic features? The populist style places an emphasis on advocating for ‘the people’. The people are understood in absolute terms as morally ‘pure’, ‘noble’ (Mudde 2004) and ‘virtuous’ (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016). Their countries are seen as promised lands where ‘the people’ have inviolable rights to the culture, heritage, jobs, and other entitlements of their political communities. These qualities and rights are evoked to point to the existential threat ‘the people’ are facing, thus turning immigrants into evil invaders and political elites into insidious enemy within. Thus, the enemies are on what Brubaker (2017a) has referred to as the vertical dimension (elites) and the horizontal dimension (‘others’), or ‘those who threaten our way of life’. By extension, by exposing and fighting the enemies, populist leaders or movements become national saviours.

This moralistic (Müller 2001) and Manichean evocation of the political community, we argue, makes the populist political style animated, implicitly or explicitly, by a notion of the *sacred* people. In using the word ‘sacred’ here, we draw on the recent trend in sociology in general and the sociology of religion in particular to build on a neo-Durkheimian conceptualisation of the sacred as continuing to be present in public life (Alexander 2003; Lynch 2012; Knott 2013). Gordon Lynch, who has made a particularly valuable contribution to the elaboration of the concept, defines it as ‘what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over meaning and conduct of social life’ (2012: 29). We believe that the notion of the sacred encompasses a range of populist cases and complements Marzouki and McDonnell and Roy’s use of ‘salvation’ in *Saving the People* (2016). Indeed, Lynch’s notion of the sacred applies well to the wide range of populist cases that do not obviously involve religion in the conventional sense. A good example can be seen in the UK Vote Leave campaign’s claim that leaving the EU would enable taking back control of £350

million per week for the National Health Service, an institution that is secular yet occupies a sacred place in British national consciousness. We also think that the 'sacred' encompasses the notions of 'noble' or 'moralistic' at capturing the moral seriousness that can animate populist followers to act in defence of their values (sometimes with violence) for the cause of 'the people'.

Putting it all together, we define populism as *a political style that sets 'sacred' people against two enemies: 'elites' and 'others'*. In this special issue, our contributors do not necessarily take up this definition and, in some cases, they may critically depart from it. Even so, our contributors do, in different ways, reflect on the roles of religion in the stylistic inflections of populism. It is worth underlining that the definition of populism that we present here is intentionally broader than cases that involve religion. Furthermore, it points to the quasi-religious connotations of populism. It, therefore, can be used in the analysis of any kind of populism, potentially foregrounding how even the most secular styles of populist politics will inevitably instantiate distinctions between the 'profane' and the 'sacred'.

### **Contributions to understanding religion and populism**

The articles in this special issue demonstrate a rich variety of ways in which religion and populism can intersect in practice. Astrid Mattes explores how the notion of 'Muslim' was used and became a category in the European discourse on immigration, tracing parliamentary debates in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The timings and manners of this usage were far from inevitable, but instead built from party-political motivations in each country. Mattes is therefore able to demonstrate how political leaders and parties enacted their own agency in setting Muslims aside as a problem, rather than simply reacting to Muslim-instigated domestic acts of terror, of which there were none in these three countries in the 1993-2013 period studied.

The next two articles consider recent high-profile populist developments in Britain and the United States. Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead investigate how forms of British Christianity may have influenced the outcome of the UK referendum to leave the EU. They find that Anglicanism is strongly associated with support for Brexit but, interestingly, that British evangelicalism is not. Comparing this case to American evangelical support for Donald Trump, Smith and Woodhead explain the more internationalist outlook and middle-class profile of British evangelicals and call into question the very assumption that supporting Brexit was in fact 'populist' in nature.

Susannah Crockford offers an ethnographic study of political supporters of Donald Trump in rural northern Arizona. She focuses on the extended family of Tom, a self-described 'redneck' who lives in a trailer and converted barn that are completely disconnected from utilities, such as electricity or water, or from other arms of the US state, like the postal service. Crockford's ethnography reveals a social world in which white supremacy, vigilantism, survivalism, and apocalyptic Christianity are closely interwoven, providing a separatist milieu in which Trump's anti-establishment politics can powerfully resonate.

Our focus then shifts to the post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where David Levy investigates how leaders have attempted to cultivate a strongman image and justify

repressive policies by targeting religious minorities, among others. This is most obvious in the case of Nursultan Nazarbayev who has served as President of Kazakhstan since that office began in 1990. Minority groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Falun Gong, are thus labelled as threatening outsiders to help these governments define their nations as 'sacred people'. Levy finds that support for repressive measures is actually stronger in Kyrgyzstan, the more democratic of the two states. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, he builds the argument that people rationally choose to support populist politics because they feel that it has the capacity to redraw the symbolic boundaries of politics in their favour by privileging them over the outsiders.

In their work on Greece, Konstantinos Papastathis and Anastasia Litina question if religion may have had a role in fomenting political dissatisfaction that served as a 'breeding ground' for Radical Right populist support. The authors find that Greek Orthodox adherence does not lead to dissatisfaction with politics, but instead is related to the support of political institutions. This is perhaps unsurprising, since the church itself is an institution deeply embedded in Greek society and culture. The role of religion in Greek populism, then, is not about generating anti-establishment sentiments, but instead seems to derive from how the Orthodox Church can endow Greeks with a sense of unique identity or even a 'sacred people'.

Finally we look nearby to Macedonia and Turkey, where Bilge Yabanci and Dane Taleski explore how religion can be co-opted into populist politics. In a theme that connects with David Levy's paper, they focus on 'ruling populists' who use the populist political style to enable their consolidation of power. In Macedonia, the VMRO-DPMNE is an interesting case of a party that did not initially embrace the monist implications of a populist view of 'the people,' but eventually gravitated towards it when the mismanagement of crises threatened to undermine their rule. The party has increasingly supported conservative religious education and mega-church building projects in order to strengthen the appeal to its base. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been in power since 2003 as the increasingly autocratic leader of the AKP party. He has similarly evolved towards a more religion-oriented position in his attempts to speak for the common Muslim 'Anatolian' and to further entrench his power.

Taken together, the contributions to this issue point to another dimension of research on populism and religion, namely the contexts and ways in which religiously inflected populist styles can become instrumental in populist politics. While the populist ideational, symbolic, and performative repertoires are hardly new (Abromeit et al 2015), exactly when, how, by whom, and with what effects they are used in politics is very much context-specific. The examples in this issue allow us to expand our focus to societies outside of western Europe and beyond established democracies. Yet, all our examples point to the varied and subtle relationship between democratic and populist politics: after all the Central Asian and Turkish autocracies in the contributions by Levy and Yabanci and Taleski claim to be mandated by democratic procedures.

The case studies presented here also point to the varied and intimate links between the populist and religious sentiments and performances. As religious expressions, including symbols and tropes, are often strongly present in people's sense of belonging, morality and even entitlement, they can be readily and sometimes easily evoked in the populist appeals to non-negotiable and absolute qualities of 'the people'. Rather than being necessarily embedded in and supplied by religious institutions, people can engage with these religious expressions

through their presence in the local cultural milieu, or what the social anthropologist Matthew Engelke (2012) calls 'ambient faith'. In her insightful introduction to the previous issue of *RSS*, Catherine Wanner (2018; see also Wanner 2014), another prominent social anthropologist, further elaborated and applied this concept to her analysis of public life and politics in contemporary Eastern Europe and Russia. Her analysis tallies well with the case studies by Crockford's and Papastathis and Litina, in which 'ambient faith' is evoked, albeit in different ways, in the populist sentiments and politics in rural America and Greece.

From this angle, religion can be part and parcel of populist styles and provide an infinite variety of cultural resources in populist politics. Religious symbols, tropes, and ideas, and the feelings of belonging, difference and entitlement they reinforce or even generate, can be creatively and selectively used by populist politicians in their calls to 'the people' for vigilance and resistance to 'elites' and 'outsiders'. Indeed, these resources can be used to justify claims to political authority through unique and authentic relationships with 'the people', such as the cases of Presidents Putin of Russia and Erdoğan of Turkey (Shterin 2016; Yabancı and Taleski in this issue). Religiously inflected references can also provide valuable resources for populist leaders to maintain their power by having ready scapegoats to blame for their failures, be this 'Muslims', or 'spiritually alien' foreigners, or 'secularist elites'. This use of these resources to legitimise and animate populist leadership by no means derives from or is consistent with theological traditions but rather represents what Veronique Altglas (2014) calls 'bricolage', or selective and purposeful construction of religiously inflected images and references from the existing cultural resources.

## Conclusion

Populism is an intriguing phenomenon because it is, or at least resembles, a form of democratic politics. The archetypical populist leader seeks the legitimacy granted by the people through rallies with large crowds, the mandate of election victories, and the mechanisms of democratic campaigning and consciousness raising. A new populist platform often begins with the grievance that 'the people' have gone unrepresented, until now. They have not been given due credit or adequate voice. Such claims should be taken seriously, and indeed some research on populism treats it as form of democratic politics that generates activism of and gives voice to previously alienated people (e.g. Lasch 1996).

Yet populism as a political style is prone to outsized claims for the people it represents. It is majoritarian in nature and calls for majority rule at the expense of minorities. It encourages seeing inequality as 'natural' and rooted in 'authentic culture' and ethnicity or race. Populist rhetoric may appear to refer to 'the people' in a Greek ideal of *demos*, yet in its certain forms it sees 'the people' in the nativist terms of *ethnos* (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016). As populism operates through democratic structures it slowly adulterates them by excluding dissenting voices and minority representation. Jan-Werner Müller (2016) puts it well when he writes that populism may claim to be based on democratic principles, but what it fosters is a kind of 'deranged democracy.'

The democratic side of populism makes its intersection with religion peculiarly problematic. The potential elective affinities of certain forms of Christianity with democracy

have been observed since Alexis de Tocqueville's (2003 [1835]) travels in America, and there has been a renewed interest in such topics in recent decades (e.g., Hatch 1991; Bruce 2004; Miller and Yamamori 2007). José Casanova (1996) has written eloquently of the powerful rise of public religions in the 1980s and 1990s, which, like a genie out of the bottle, no longer felt beholden to the containing logics of the state. These religious forces can be powerful drivers for democratic renewal and for speaking truth to power. But what happens when democratically-oriented public religions go awry? The multifaceted roles of religion in populism should prompt us to abandon any naïve assumptions that religion is merely an empowering force, or that when it does empower it will work for the social good. The cases in this special issue reveal elements of religion that are less often discussed in political or sociological analysis. Religion and democracy are a potent mix. Studying populism movements should give us pause to reflect on our understandings of the sacred and how these can, in some cases, bring social harm (Lynch 2015). We should also consider the implications of populist majoritarianism, 'Christianism' or 'Islamism' for the freedom of religion and protection of religious minorities.

Yet for all the doom-mongering that naturally arises from research on populism, it is worth recognising that exploring it can also make us wiser. Benjamin Arditi (2007) writes of how populism is like a drunken guest at a polite dinner party. Such a guest could unsettle the carefully honed decorum of the evening and, unhindered by sobriety, speak some unpalatable truths. Studying religion and populism together involves setting aside our decorous assumptions and it is likely to prove uncomfortable. For social science and other disciplines, however, the populist drunk at the dinner party may be precisely the Cassandra-like voice we need to alert us to unseen social forces in our complex, ambiguous, and ever changing world.

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